

Working Women's Centre

258 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, 3000.

Phone: 654 1228

Discussion Paper No. 36
ISSN-0314-6006

February/March, 1979.

WOMEN AND STRESS IN INDUSTRY

"YOU'RE NOT TREATED AS WOMEN BUT AS DIRT"

In Discussion Paper No.31 we outlined the theoretical viewpoint of how stress at home and work affects women workers. Late last year, with assistance from the Vehicle Builders Employees Federation, the Miscellaneous Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Metalworkers and Shipwrights Union, we were able to carry out a pilot survey on stress of working women and how they cope with it. This paper is about that survey.

JOB STRESS

"You're just a number to the boss - you feel like a prisoner"

Over half of the women interviewed said that TEMPERATURE, FUMES, DIRT AND NOISE were significant sources of stress to them but often did not think that these factors had a bad effect on their health. There seemed to be a great ignorance of occupational health: for example, one woman who breathed paint-thinner fumes all day, which made her feel really 'high', and who also had a respiratory complaint, said that she did not think these fumes were a health hazard. SPEED AND PRESSURE OF WORK were mentioned by 30 per cent of women. Many women said they cannot stop to talk without the foreman yelling at them, while male workers spend a lot of time standing around talking, often with the foreman joining in. HEAVINESS of the work, INADEQUATE REST PERIODS, the LENGTH OF THE DAY were also mentioned by one third of the women. As one woman said:

"Some days I would give anything just to sit down for 10 minutes."

And another:

"The only chance for a break is if I work really fast or the line breaks down or is stopped."

40% of women were angry about the REPETITIVE NATURE of their work, the fact that they had little or no FREEDOM TO ORGANISE THEIR WORK the way they wanted to, that NO ONE CONSULTED THEM about the job and that the work OFFERED NO CHALLENGE. This figure challenges the idea that women are generally content to do monotonous work. On the other hand it is not surprising that many women do appear to accept easy, repetitive tasks when we consider that they also have the responsibility of the household and children. The woman who begins the day already tired is understandably prepared to accept work which requires little mental effort.

Over half of the women complained that PERSONS ABOVE THEM DID NOT TREAT THEM WITH DIGNITY or LIKE HUMAN BEINGS. Many women said that they were treated much worse than the male workers were; that the foremen were rude and abusive to women but treated the men with much greater respect. In two of the three factories most women said such things as:

"They treat women like dirt",

"Women are treated like slaves, like animals",

"The men stand around and talk all day but the women have to keep working",

"The foremen are always easier on the men".

Women often said that foremen would not be game to speak to men in the way they do to women and that foremen took their frustrations out on the women. That women work harder and suffer worse treatment was one of the most commonly mentioned issues in the survey.

Thirty per cent of the women said they would be AFRAID TO REFUSE TASKS OR MAKE REQUESTS even when it is within their rights to do so and many more expressed resentment about this in later discussions.

FEAR OF GETTING THE SACK was mentioned by thirty per cent of women as a source of stress. Many said the fact that women were always the first to be sacked made them afraid to complain about conditions, let alone do anything about them. They spoke of incidents where women were put off with the promise that they would be given the next job available, only to find that a number of men were employed in the meantime. Many women were angry that society and employers consider work to be more important to men, saying that their household couldn't survive unless they had a job. Given that women tend to be made redundant before men, it could be said that fear of getting the sack is a greater source of stress to women heads of families than to men in the same position. Also men are more likely to know how to fight to keep their job and face less discrimination in getting another job.

JOB SATISFACTION

"I work because I have to. I wouldn't come here unless I needed the money".

When asked "IF YOU DIDN'T NEED THE MONEY WOULD YOU GO ON WORKING IN A JOB LIKE THIS?" ninety per cent answered that they would not. Those who said they would continue gave reasons centered around their need to get out of the house and the company of the women at work.

All the above results suggest that overall JOB SATISFACTION among women is very low. However, when asked how rewarding they found their jobs, the women tended to either give neutral answers such as:

"It's not really satisfying or dissatisfying"

or slightly more positive answers. Women said they found the MONEY and COMPANIONSHIP satisfying and seemed to ignore negative aspects. It appears that a lack of negative aspects means that women perceive the job in a positive way. For example:

"It's a good job because at least it's clean here".

Women's expectations of job satisfaction are so low that if they can find a job that is bearable then they feel reasonably satisfied.

Low job expectations are perfectly understandable, given the female factory worker's reality, and are probably also a coping mechanism in that high expectations would undoubtedly lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction. However low job expectations mean that women are unlikely to actively confront the sources of stress merely because they expect stress to exist and/or are more willing to put up with the situation.

"There's no point in letting anything get me down because there's nothing I can do about it".

Women in factories tend to have low self-esteem as workers or may see themselves more in terms of the feminine role of wife/mother rather than as a worker ... and a low or no image of self as worker means women are more likely to tolerate bad work conditions.

LIFE STRESS.

"I don't know of anything I can do to change anything".

When questioned about general sources of stress, over eighty per cent of women complained of LACK OF TIME TO REST AND RELAX AND NOT HAVING THE CHANCE TO DO THINGS THEY REALLY WANTED TO DO. This is hardly surprising considering that working women do two full-time jobs. Women said their life tends to be a constant struggle to keep up with things - which means constant stress.

Two thirds of women mentioned NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY TO MEET THEIR NEEDS, which again demonstrates that these women do not work for "extra money" but for necessity.

STRESS DUE TO WOMENS DUAL ROLE.

"I don't expect help with chores from my husband. He's too busy with his work".

Sixty per cent of women answered that NOT SPENDING AS MUCH TIME AS THEY WOULD LIKE WITH THEIR FAMILY, FEELING GUILTY ABOUT THIS AND NOT HAVING ENOUGH TIME TO DO HOUSEWORK were sources of stress. These figures highlight the amount of stress working women face because of their dual roles and show that they are not only stressed by lack of time but also by guilt because they accept total responsibility for the family.

Over two thirds of women said that DIFFICULTY HAVING A SICK CHILD MINDED was a great source of stress. The woman who doesn't have a friend or relative to rely on if her children get sick has only two options and both are sources of stress: she can leave the child home alone while she goes to work and worry all day or she can take time off herself and face the consequences of that. It is quite unreasonable that women carry the whole burden of absence due to children's illnesses. Provision of adequate child care and leave to cover children's illnesses available to BOTH parents - not only the mother - would alleviate this problem.

Forty per cent of women said they had difficulty finding CHILD CARE CENTRES with suitable hours and where they felt their children were well looked after. Even those with school-aged children were still worried about WHAT KIDS DID AFTER SCHOOL AND WHETHER THEY WENT TO SCHOOL AND GOT THERE SAFELY.

The responsibility for children is obviously a great source of stress to working women and again this burden could be lifted with adequate provision of child care and an equal sharing of responsibility between men and women.

HEALTH.

"Standing all day makes me very tired".

It seems that all the most common health complaints reported can be traced either to conditions at work or the stress outside work.

Over half of the women complained of CONTINUAL TIREDNESS and thirty per cent reported that they often suffered from NERVOUSNESS, DEPRESSION, DIFFICULTY SLEEPING, HEADACHES AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE.

SORE THROATS, SWELLING OR ACHING JOINTS AND MUSCLES, BACKACHES AND EYESIGHT PROBLEMS were also reported by one third of women.

About forty per cent said their MENSTRUAL PERIODS were a source of stress to them. Many mentioned that they resented having men in charge of them because they were embarrassed to mention menstruation to men and because the men showed no understanding toward them. Some women said they worked harder when they felt a period coming on so that they could slow down later if necessary and still cover their quota. But this meant the foreman often told them off. Others complained that the foreman had abused them for going to the toilet too often and that he timed them. They were embarrassed to give the reason that they were bleeding heavily. Or he complained that they took too long at the toilet, not acknowledging that it takes longer when the woman has to go to her bag because there is no sanitary provision in the toilets.

REACTIONS TO STRESS

"It's no good worrying about things - you have to take things as they come".

About forty per cent of women said they would EAT, SMOKE or DRINK to ease tension. Only ten per cent answered that they would take HEADACHE POWDERS or SEDATIVES PRESCRIBED BY THEIR DOCTOR but in later conversation quite a number mentioned that they did take this type of medication.

One third of women said they would try to IGNORE A PROBLEM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE and fifty per cent said they felt that you JUST HAD TO ACCEPT WHAT HAPPENS because there was NOTHING THEY COULD DO ABOUT IT. These responses reflect the powerlessness which so many women feel. In contrast, however, two of the women recognized the importance of collective action in fighting workplace issues and consequently were involved in their union.

"Conditions at work make me so angry I get more active in the union to change things".

CONCLUSIONS

"It's not up to me to offer suggestions or make changes at work ... they'd never listen to me anyway ..."

It is clear that women factory workers suffer greater oppression and consequently greater stress than do male factory workers. There seem to be three main responses to this stress:

- (i) Women become actively involved in their union and appear to get great satisfaction from this.
"The union has been very good for getting us breaks, good wages and safety clothes. It's made the place much better".
- (ii) They get very angry and bitter about their situation but feel powerless to change it. These women do not accept their lot but think it is a waste of valuable time and energy to try to change things. Their stress is compounded by their feeling that the situation will not improve. Many seem disillusioned about their union but would probably make very effective members with encouragement.
"If I had my time over again I'd like to be a social worker. Now I'd like to be more involved in union activities".
- (iii) Women 'switch off' on the job and possibly at home too. The only way they can cope with their situation is to ignore it as much as possible. They lower their expectations rather than cope with constant frustration - accepting their situation means they can stop worrying about it. This is an understandable response, given their powerless position and the fact that they are coping with two jobs, but it means that these women do not fight to change their situation. Instead they become even easier targets for oppression and abuse as workers.

WHAT UNIONS CAN DO

It is important that unions recognise women face greater barriers to involvement, mainly because they fulfil two roles and so carry a greater burden than men because of their socialization and low self-esteem. Unions need to take active steps to encourage more participation and interest in union affairs. It is vital unions encourage women to be vocal about sources of stress at work and support them to take action to improve their situation. Many women feel that their union is not interested in women which partly explains their lack of involvement with the union.

"I don't believe in women's liberation but I believe in equality, equal pay and equal recognition".